Finnish Women Making Religion. Between Ancestors and Angels

(Based on the book with same name, see:


Church history of Finland in a nutshell

The history – and the history of religion – of Finland has usually been presented to foreigners from the state historical aspect. From the medieval times to 1809, Finland was part of Sweden and from 1809 to 1917 it belonged to the Russian Empire (or as Pekka Kuusisto said, Russia belonged to Finland). The history of religion in Finland has been told nearly exclusively from the perspective of religious institutions that is Lutheran and Orthodox Churches. Less known is the everyday life of common folk and, particularly, women’s role in the area of religion.

From the 19th century on, the Lutheran Church has fatefuly promoted the nationalistic objectives of the Finnish Nation. However, from the Catholic Middle Ages up till now it has also, in many respects, been the most international institution. It has imported to Finland many cultural currents. There are also within the Evangelical Lutheran Church many spiritual movements and groups. Some of the groups stem from the 18th or 19th century. New groups, such as friends of Taizé have emerged. Common to all these groups is that they have their own emphases but still want to belong to the Lutheran Church. Today almost 80% of Finns are members of
the Evangelical Lutheran Church. The church is a well-respected institution especially for its social work with the most needy.

The most significant religious minority has been the Orthodox Church (1.1%). Its influence grew under the time of the Russian Empire and along the Lutheran Church it has had the status of state church in Finland. The system has been dismantled step by step and the churches enjoy greater internal independence.

Although Finland has the reputation of being a forerunner in the matters of equality, the Lutheran Church has not necessarily endorsed issues related to equality. Compared to other Lutheran countries, women’s ordination was approved remarkably late. The denial of the access to official religious power as priests has however not made women passive as creative religious actors.

(some numbers: Pentecostals appr. 45000; Catholics appr. 14000; the Free Church 14000; Baptists 2400)

“Finnish Women Making Religion” paints a vivid picture of the several creative ways Finnish women, during a time span of approximately 100 years, have actively lived out, made, commented, made use of and changed the religious conditions of their time and surroundings. Historically, Finland is very dominantly a Lutheran society; even today statistics count almost 73% of Finns as members of the Evangelical Lutheran church. However, Finland also figures as a secularized society when measured by ordinary sociological variables.
Furthermore, multiculturalism in Finland (as large scale immigration or as alternative religions) is relatively fresh and also, even today, modest when compared to many neighboring countries. These are facts often emphasized as special characteristics of the Finnish society, mentality and culture. In this emphasis Finland figures as a secular protestant country where religion is either a private issue or a pure ceremonial feature of stately life. Our book, however, wants to complicate this picture by presenting 12 case-studies from the perspective of women’s activities in relation to religion.

In Finland, like in most other countries, women are found more actively religious on the grass-root level than men. Finnish women received pastoral rights in the Lutheran Church of Finland in 1986 and first women were ordained in 1988 – that is twenty-six years ago. Even so, Finnish feminist theology has not developed into a recognized academic activity. Instead (and perhaps also because of this), women have voiced and performed their religious views and practice in several other ways. These ways include private religious practice in daily life and in the intimacy of the home. But this is not the whole picture, which the rich variety of sources and perspectives of the chapters of our book seeks to reveal.

Women have made multitudes of things with religion on the crossroads of the private and the public. They have cared for the souls and bodies of the dead in the pre-Christian folk religion or manipulated social relations by prophecy and visions. Also, working as missionaries or doctors in foreign countries and healing with angels and spirits are examples of how the borderlines between private and public spheres have twisted in the hands of women. Women’s relations to religion materialize for instance in daily
activities, in caring, curing and education, in writing, environmental activity, science and feminism.

In our book the case studies make visible the multiple ways and levels religion has been involved in women’s agency. For some women, religion has been a key instrument in their strive for autonomy, equality, authority or identity whereas for others it has been used in maintaining or construing ties and relations or creative visions of life. With religion women have variously either maintained tradition and order or pursued changes and transformations. In some cases religious life includes active interaction with transcendent others whereas in other cases religion rather provides a habitual basis for meaningful embodied action in a spatially and temporally changing world. The book depicts religion that is not one but many – as well as it reflects religious agency that has several forms and modes.

Furthermore, the examples in this book concretely illuminate the several and many-layered links that Finnish Lutheranism has always had to its others: women and their religions have (and always had) international contacts and touching points with other religions as well as with society and politics. This gives us, the writers, ground to argue that Finnish Lutheranism has never been a bounded religious entity or, indeed, only one religion. Instead, in the hands of women and when encountered with other religious and cultural influences, it becomes many religions. Our idea is, that this concrete observation and argument – as well as the emphasis on practical religion and religious agency that links to several social fields – makes the book of interest to the international audience. From the window of Finnish women’s practical and relational religiosities
we can see a much wider landscape of religious practice as well its involvement with the historical process of the Nordic welfare state.

The book is historically organized in four sections. The first section starts from the late 19th Century folk religion and ends in the time of the World War I. The second section covers the time between the World War I and II. The third section takes the reader from the years of the 50s’ to the 80’s. The fourth section concentrates on present day and religion that becomes increasingly global, democratic and heterogeneous. Some of the case studies focus on selected individual women whereas others build upon larger groups and sources – all chapters depict the historical and social context of the case.

The 12 writers of this book come from several disciplines: study of religion, history, church history, folklore and gender studies.

**Terhi Utriainen, Päivi Salmesvuori and Helena Kupari: Introduction: Critical and Creative Turns**

*Finnish Women Making Religion--Between Ancestors and Angels* displays a wide range of Finnish women’s historical and present-day ways of making religion, within religious institutions, on their margins, and outside. Finnish women have often been described as hard-working, strong-spirited, and independent. Therefore, it may come as a surprise that only for a relatively short time women have had the same rights and positions as men in the field of official religion in Finland. Nevertheless, Finnish women have always been very active and resourceful in their religious roles both in public as well as in private life. After we had written the introduction and the whole
manuscript was ready, we realized that what we actually accomplished was to rewrite the history of Finland of the last 100 years. By including women, “watching the women” as Peggy Mahler has suggested we were able to see religion and religious change making in a way that paints a much richer account of history than has been told earlier.

Marja-Liisa Keinänen: “Feeding the Dead”-Women “Doing” Religion and Kinship in Traditional Russian Orthodox Karelia

Marja-Liisa Keinänen discusses women’s folk religion and death-related rituals on both sides of the Eastern border of Finland as work of kinship. She emphasizes the processual nature of kinship as something that is done and redone in everyday social interaction. Thus, through regular commemorative practices, such as feeding and remembering, the women kept the dead as active members of the society. This implied that the well-being of the living and the success of their enterprises were believed to be dependent on the benevolence of the ancestors, and conversely, the well-being of the deceased lay in the hands of the living. Mortuary rituals, especially lamentation, served an important therapeutic function, whereas the collective meals the women organized joined the two parts of the family together as a moral community. This was particularly important during the historical-political context of the Soviet rule.

Päivi Salmesvuori: Convincing One’s Self and Other People. The Case of Trance Preacher Helena Konttinen
A prophetic woman, the trance-preacher Helena Konttinen (1871–1916), is the focus of my chapter. Trance-preaching or sleeping preaching, as it is also called, is a phenomenon in the history of Christianity that seems to have been exercised especially by women. Sleeping preaching or trance preaching, as it is also called, is a phenomenon in the history of Christianity that seems to have been exercised especially by women. One of the earliest known cases is from the fifteenth-century Spain, where Mother Juana de la Cruz (1481–1534) became famous of her long sermons, which she delivered as in sleep. However, there were also some men, e.g. in 1854–1876 the Presbyterian C. B. Sanders aka X+ Y = Z in North Alabama, USA. He gave astonishing sermons and speeches in a sleep like state. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, sleeping preaching became very popular: there were over one hundred sleeping preachers in Finland at the turn of the twentieth century. The most famous was a poor peasant woman named Helena Konttinen. Her career started around 1905 and lasted until her death in 1916. People came to see her performances even over longer distances. With the help of performance theory, I focus on how and why Konttinen succeeded in becoming a religious authority. What did she do with religion and how her audiences responded to her actions. Her popularity shows that she served needs of many people. People came to her to be physically or mentally healed, but many came also simply out of curiosity. Most people felt they had seen a real prophet in action, some people had ambiguous feelings. Konttinen’s performances did not leave anybody untouched.

Tiina Kinnunen: Alexandra Gripenberg’s Feminist Christianity
Feminist activists in the nineteenth century Finland were divided over the meaning of Christian religion for women's emancipation. In her chapter, Tiina Kinnunen studies the relation between Christianity and feminist activism in the context of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Finnish middle class feminism. The analysis centers on Alexandra Gripenberg’s (1857–1913) Lutheran inspired advocacy of gender equality. One aspect of this advocacy was her combat against the spread of secular ideas, which within Nordic feminism were represented especially by the Swedish writer Ellen Key. Based on close reading of archival sources and published feminist writings, Kinnunen suggests that tensions inside feminist circles were often based on differences in religious views. This argument is quite new, since as we know, sometimes historians have been accused of religion blindness. This is a concept that I believe, the Swedish scholar Inger Hammar made popular in the context of the history of Swedish feminism. Like the Finnish play writer and feminist, Minna Canth, Gripenberg understood that Christianity was fully in favor of women's rights. She and Canth thought that Ellen Key was belittling the meaning of Christianity, advocating for free love and essentializing women in their role as mothers. I studied for another book Canth's, Gripenberg’s and Konttinen’s use of the Bible and found that in her writings Gripenberg never referred to any passages of the Bible to promote her ideas. She used encouraging examples from other countries in order to demonstrate that the demands of the women's movement were globally accepted. The American suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton (creator of the famous Women's Bible; 1815–1902) was one of her most important idols. She also often referred to two Scandinavians as role models for her readers. One was the author Fredrika Runeberg (1807–1879), the wife of Finland’s national poet, Johan Runeberg (1804–1877). Another figure that she often praised was the Swedish author Fredrika
Bremer (1801–1865). Unlike the "heathen" Ellen Key, according to Gripenberg, Bremer was an example of true feminist Christianity.

Heini Hakosalo: “Our life work”: Professional Women and Christian Values in Early Twentieth-Century Finland

Heini Hakosalo investigates what happened when female professionalism clashed with the prevailing Christian view on womanhood and women's work in Finland in early twentieth century. Hakosalo explores this collision from within, as it were, by inquiring into the experiences and career choices of three deeply religious women who embraced many traditional Christian values but also carved for themselves a career in medicine, an archetypical masculine profession. She asks how these women conceived of the ideal of the Christian woman and saw themselves in relation to this ideal—illuminating the tensions they experienced as Christian women at the medical faculty. From the outset, there would seem to be a poor fit between professionalism and a feminine vocation. Qualities associated with a feminine calling included lifelong commitment, submissiveness, self-sacrifice, and renunciation of outward signs of wealth and status. Professions, on the contrary, were exclusive occupations that could be entered only after a long and expensive, usually academic, training and that were characterized by a strong esprit de corps (that did not exclude fierce internal competition), high social status, high income, high degree of professional autonomy, and above all a considerable stake in social and—on occasion—political power.

The influence of Theosophy and Anthroposophy in Finland is approached by Tiina Mahlamäki through the writer Kersti Bergroth’s (1886--1975) life and work.

Emmanuel Swedenborg’s and in particular Rudolf Steiner’s Theosophical and Anthroposophical writings strongly emphasized creativity and thus appealed to many artists who, from this perspective, became conveyors of hidden spiritual truths. One of these artists was Bergroth, who declared that she had expressed her whole life in her writings, “but always veiled, covered, deceptive, quite different than it was ever lived”. In the case of Bergroth, the artist in fact becomes the conveyer of spiritual truths. Bergroth’s life also demonstrates the impulse of Bildung as an important ingredient in this early twentieth century spirituality. Yet there seems to be a tension in Bergroth’s views of art and religion. The pure and solemn spirituality of her parents is for Bergroth clearly an exemplary form of religion. This Pietistic religiosity, however, rejects art as secular and dangerous. On the other hand, Bergroth sees religion and art as mutually dependent. Bergroth was also much occupied with questions of death and dying, apparently due to her experience of the loss of close relatives. She maintained also that when the author’s experiences are expressed through art, they become objective and universal to all humankind, and are no longer personal confessions.

Seija Jalagin: Intersections of Gender, Religion and Ethnicity in Christian Mission

Seija Jalagin addresses gender and ethnicity in the Finnish context of missionary work. While gendered hierarchies, male-dominated organizational structures, and women’s exclusion from spiritual professions seemed largely uncontested in late
nineteenth and early twentieth-century Finland, foreign missions became a forum for renegotiating gender in the making of religion. It would be tempting to interpret these early twentieth-century foreign missionary women as exceptions among the professional women of their time. However, Jalagin argues that, if anything, it was ethnicity that presented itself as a factor that forced foreign missionaries to renegotiate given organizational hierarchies and ways of thinking. In this vein, Jalagin’s analysis uncovers variations in how gender, religion, and ethnicity intersected in Christian missions, highlighting the complex power relations at play.

Helena Kupari: “I Was both Lutheran and Orthodox”--Evacuee Karelian Orthodox Women, Bi-denominational Families, and the Making of Religion

Through analysis of interview material, Helena Kupari discusses the religious practices of evacuee Karelian Orthodox women (originally from the area ceded to the Soviet Union after the Second World War) in the context of post-war Finland. She shows how these women, who were often married to Lutheran men, navigated between making religion as wives and mothers of Lutheran families and as individuals with personal spiritual goals and preferences. Orthodoxy, as such, supported the women in their familial roles that reflected the traditional idea of women as caretakers of the home. However, in a mixed-faith environment, Orthodox practices also involved taking time for oneself and for one’s personal religious life—an observation that brings into relief the individualistic aspects of the women’s religiosity.

Anni Tsokkinen: Life-Based Theology of Finnish Women Theologians
The spring of 2010 was pivotal in the history of the Lutheran Church of Finland. It was then that the first ever woman, Irja Askola (born 1952), was elected as bishop within the Church. Before her nomination, Irja Askola was perhaps primarily known among the general public as a poet, although she had a long career as an expert in ecumenical and theological matters. As surprising as it sounds, this is actually typical of Finnish women theologians, several of whom have gained a high standing as writers, columnists, and poets—rather than as theologians per se. Anni Tsokkinen examines the kind of theology two of these women, namely Bishop Askola and her senior Irja Kilpeläinen (1911–1999), have created in their literary work, work that has been written first and foremost for a lay audience.

**Tuija Hovi: Servants and Agents--Gender Roles in Neo-Charismatic Christianity**

Neo-Charismatic or “Third Wave” Charismatic Christianity, especially as practiced within independent local congregations, is gaining in importance in Finland—an example of the intertwining of Finnish trends with global religious developments. Charismatic Christianity is characterized by the strict personal commitment of adherents, active missionary tendency, conservative family values, and social control.

In her chapter, Tuija Hovi discusses how religious agency is understood by Neo-Charismatic Christian women in the context of the secularized and pluralistic Finnish society. According to Hovi, this understanding—and the practice informed by it—is influenced by the women’s gendered interpretations of the Charismatic doctrine that views all believers as being potentially in possession of supernatural gifts.

**Heikki Pesonen and Terhi Utriainen: Finnish Women Sacralizing Nature**
One hundred years ago, the sociologist George Simmel suggested that life itself may become sacred in new ways in the future. This meant that people would become more aware than before of the fragility of life’s sometimes too self-evident realities. Heikki Pesonen and Terhi Utriainen propose that nature has, for some people, become precious and sacred in this manner. The focus on nature, as a fragile reality on the one hand and as the locus of the sacred on the other hand, can be found not only in particular nature religions but also within the wider spectrum of both traditional and modern religions and world views.

Pesonen (the only male writer of our book 😊) and Utriainen examine, through two cases, Finnish women’s religiosity in relation to the issue of how to construct the relationship between humanity, nature, and divinity. In the first case, three academic women, who define themselves as (eco)feminists, articulate their understanding of the sacrality of nature in their writing. The second case is an interview with a woman involved in alternative spirituality. All accounts, in their own ways, reflect critically upon the Finnish Lutheran tradition and its values related to nature. They also represent, with changing emphasis, feminist, feminine, and female religiosity in present-day Finland.

**Johanna Ahonen: Finnish women’s Turn Towards India. Negotiations between Lutheran Christianity and Indian Spirituality**

For me it has always been important that I can experience what I believe by myself. That I’m not only told how things are or what is said in the book, but that I can get some kind of experience of it. So that it is like a living reality, living truth for me.
—Follower of Mother Amma, b. 1977
This epigraph in Johanna Ahonen’s chapter aptly depicts the emphasis on individual experience among Finnish practitioners of Indian spirituality.

Finnish women who today choose to step outside the religious mainstream and turn toward India for spiritual inspiration are the subject examined by Johanna Ahonen. The focus is on two Indian–based movements, Mother Amma’s movement and Sahaja Yoga. Making use of interview material, the chapter discusses the dynamics of the relationship between Indian spirituality and Lutheran Christianity. Ahonen’s interviewees are critical toward the Lutheran Church, but the data also shows that Indian spirituality and Lutheranism are not necessarily understood as mutually exclusive. On the contrary, in the lives of the women, Christianity increasingly acquires “yogaized” dimensions and tones in Finland.

**Terhi Utriainen: Angels, Agency and Emotions: Global Religion for Women in Finland?**

Today, angels are everywhere. From Christian imagery they have flown into art, popular culture, the Internet, film, commerce, and Western people’s imaginations and practices. Angel culture and angel spirituality are a visible form of globalized religion that is closely connected with commercial and popular culture. Well-known international angel “gurus” who travel between countries and continents and sell various kinds of angel practices (such as meditations and therapies) and items (books, oracle cards, jewelry, etc.) include charismatic women like Doreen Virtue (USA), Diane Cooper (UK), Lorna Byrne (Ireland), and Maria Zavou (Greece). Also included among their numbers is the Princess of Norway, Märta-Louise, who opened her own
angel healing school and has prompted a sizable public discussion on angels and the boundaries of “proper” Lutheran religion in her country.

Thus angel spirituality is increasingly popular both globally and in Finland. It combines elements from Christianity to New Age and commercial culture, simultaneously evading institutional religious forms and structures. Terhi Utriainen’s ethnographic case focuses on women involved in angel practices—women who invite and actively involve angels in their lives in order to deal with such important everyday concerns as relations and emotions, to better care for themselves and their families. With angels as their best friends, the women create a sense of shared and participatory agency needed in many complexities of modern life. This practical and therapeutic present-day folk religion is open to anybody and easily engaged with; thus, it may challenge both institutional religions and secular therapies and be indicative of religious change.

The term lived religion, gained field from the 60’s onward. It came from the French sociologists, la religion vécue and meant mostly the piety of laity (Gabriel le Bras). When talking about lived religion scholars have also talked about local and popular religion and of ordinary people or everyday life.

The critical reader might ask where men are in this picture. They are there ordn many roles and positions and more or less explicitly. Men appear as representatives of religious and cultural authority, as colleagues and family members, as friends and assistants and sometimes as mere side figures. We challenge the reader to find them and to read them out. These accounts are thus not exclusively and only about women’s religiosity but about religion told from the perspective of women’s religion making. We have done what Peggy Mahler (2008) suggests, that is “watch the women!” when you wish to see something important about what happens in the field of religion.
Päivi’s projects:

*Birgitta of Sweden*


Fragmented Visions webpage:

fragvis.net

*And*

Living with Difficult Memories and Diverse Identities Era.Net.Rus Plus-project
Webpage: [http://www.livingmemories-era.net/](http://www.livingmemories-era.net/)